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TAGS: [PBTS](#) [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [IR](#) [AJ](#)

SUBJECT: VISIT OF AZERBAIJANI MINISTER OF DEFENSE TO IRAN

Classified By: Ambassador Derse for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (C) Azerbaijani Minister of Defense Safar Abiyev visited Iran February 18-19, his first visit to the Islamic Republic since 2004. During a February 12 meeting with the Ambassador, Abiyev noted that he was preparing for the trip. In addition to Iranian Defense Minister Mostafa Mohammad-Najjar, Abiyev said he also planned to meet with Minister of Information Qualm Huseyn Mohseni Ejei and Minister of Foreign Affairs Manuchehr Mottaki. When the Ambassador pressed him for details on the topics to be discussed, Abiyev smiled and coyly noted that there were "many issues" which needed to be discussed, including Iranian support for Armenia and other issues which "were not military related." He indicated that one of the topics to be discussed would be the Iranian-backed Mahdi Army Group, which was convicted in December 2007 of spying for the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), the Minister complained that Iran has "sent too many trained people against Azerbaijan." He said that the 12-16 people from the so-called "Mahdi Army Group" who were currently in custody "still have not confessed" to their ties to Iran. The Ambassador reminded him of the USG's position and emphasized that, given Iran's pursuit of nuclear weapons programs and support for terrorist groups, the United States encouraged its friends and partners not to expand their relations with Tehran.

¶2. (C) Speaking more broadly of the Azerbaijan-Iran relationship, Abiyev said that Iran was "against Azerbaijan's independence" and also "against ethnic Azerbaijanis living in Iran." Referring to the 2002 incident between BP and Iran in the disputed Aroz field, he said that he was concerned about the increased number of "small vessels" that Iran had put in the Caspian Sea. He said that he believed Iran would put pressure (means unspecified) on foreign oil companies so that they would not continue their activities in the Caspian Sea. He also said that he expected that Iran would plan some kind of "provocation" against Azerbaijan, specifically "catching an Azerbaijani citizen with classified information on Iran."

¶3. (C) Local press reported that, following his meeting with Najjar, Abiyev made a typically strong statement regarding the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, stating that "Azerbaijan will liberate its territories in one way or another. That is definite." He also publicly promised that "Azerbaijan will not allow any foreign force to threaten neighboring and friendly Iran from Azerbaijani territory." Foreign Minister Mottaki stressed the fraternal and brotherly ties between the countries. Two Azerbaijani political analysts separately speculated to emboffs that the likely primary reason for the trip from Iran's perspective was to get Abiyev's pledge that Azerbaijan would not allow an attack on Iran from Azerbaijani soil.

¶4. (C) COMMENT: The timing of Abiyev's visit is

interesting, given that other senior officials, including President Aliyev, have told us recently that Azerbaijan,s relations with Iran have been as "tense" as they have ever been following the trial and conviction of the Mahdi Army Group. Abiyev clearly views Iran with concern, likely due also to Iran,s ongoing preparations to sail a new Caspian energy platform. Abiyev,s visit likely was intended in part to help manage current tensions, as the GOAJ believes Azerbaijan,s continued independence and sovereignty depends on maintaining pragmatic relations with its more powerful neighbors. The local press quoted the Iranian Ambassador saying President Aliyev plans to travel to Iran in March. Neither the Foreign Minister nor the President's staff had any information, and was unlikely to confirm or deny the report. we will continue to seek confirmation of this visit and will report updates septel.

DERSE